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SUBJECT: Crowd Size Drops On Second Day of Opposition Protests

Refs: Minsk 297

¶1. (SBU) Summary: On March 20, opposition presidential candidates Aleksandr Milinkevich and Aleksandr Kozulin organized another protest rally on October Square in Minsk. Emboff observers estimate that between 18:30 and 20:00, 5,000 to 6,000 Belarusians participated in the rally, a significant decrease from the 10,000 to 12,000 people who attended the protest rally on election night. Milinkevich and Kozulin urged supporters to set up tents and maintain a continual presence on the square until the Central Election Committee annulled the election results and scheduled another round of elections. The opposition leaders noted they will continue to convene large protest rallies on October Square at 18:30 every evening. Throughout the night and on March 21 the approximately 200 supporters on the square huddled around several tents, waved banned nationalist Belarusian flags, listened to Belarusian rock and folklore music, and took turns delivering motivational speeches. There were no reported acts of violence on the square, but Belarusian security forces reportedly arrested a number of Belarusians who were attempting to take hot coffee and warm clothes to the protesters.
.End Summary.

Opposition Candidates Call For Round-the-Clock Protest Rally

¶2. (U) Ten Plus Coalition candidate Aleksandr Milinkevich and Belarusian Social Democratic Party ("Gramada") Aleksandr Kozulin organized a second protest rally on March 20 protest rally on October Square. During their stump speeches, Milinkevich and Kozulin categorically rejected the results of the March 19 elections, in which Lukashenko received 83 percent, Milinkevich 6 percent, pro-Lukashenko MP Sergey Gaidukevich 4 percent, and Kozulin 2 percent (reftel). Milinkevich and Kozulin noted that although some people recognized the official vote tallies as legitimate, the "majority of people laugh at the [election tally] percentages." Milinkevich noted that the Belarusian authorities are trying to scare and intimidate democratic-minded Belarusians, but in reality, "they [the authorities] are scared." Milinkevich called on supporters to erect several tents and remain on the square, and he and Kozulin will convene another large protest rally on March 21 at 18:30. He urged the friends and family members of protesters to bring to the square hot coffee and extra clothing.

Other Rally Speakers Encourage Opposition To Keep The Faith

13. (U) A number of prominent opposition leaders, such as Milinkevich deputies Sergey Kalyakin and Anatoly Lebedko, as well as Russian Duma member Vladimir Ryzhkov, and several members of the Belarusian artistic community, gave brief remarks during the March 20 rally. Their remarks underscored the illegitimacy of the presidential elections, the repressive nature of the Belarusian authorities, and the need to maintain a united front against Lukashenko. The speakers noted that the large rallies on October Square have taken Belarus one step closer to genuine democracy. Ryzhkov added that he "and other Russians" will convince Russia to support the cause of the democratic opposition in Belarus.

Protesters Maintain A Constant Presence On Square

14. (U) By late evening March 20, the crowd size decreased to some 200 people. The protesters erected approximately eight tents and formed a human shield around the tents in an effort to prevent the security forces from removing the tents. Throughout the night, the protesters played Belarusian rock and folklore music on the portable loudspeakers, took turns delivering motivational speeches, and waved banned nationalist Belarusian flags. By early afternoon March 21 the crowd was less than 200, but the supporters have maintained the tents on the square.

Security Presence Decreases On Second Night, But Still Effective

15. (SBU) Emboffs observed that although the security presence around October Square on March 20 was strong, it was considerably less than it was during the March 19 rally. Specifically, there were significantly less observed OMON and other special forces units on the periphery of October Square (but of out sight of the

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protesters) on March 20. However, the number of plainclothes security officers on October Square had increased. Emboffs did not observe any incidents of violence, but some press reports indicate there were a few minor confrontations between security forces and protesters on the square.

Security Forces Haul Away Those Who Help Keep Protesters Warm

16. (SBU) October Square observers have reported that security forces have arrested Belarusians for taking food, hot coffee, and warm clothes to the protesters on the square. Belgian diplomats assigned to Moscow but observing the elections in Belarus told DCM and Pol/Econ Chief on March 21 that they witnessed Belarusian security forces arresting one Belarusian who was taking a thermos and clothing onto the square, but they allowed another Belarusian who had nothing on his person to enter the square. Human rights activist Vladimir Lobkovich recently told Poloffs that the editor of independent newspaper Nasha Niva was also arrested near the square for taking coffee and clothes to the protesters. Police arrested Milinkevich's two sons in the evening of March 20 for attempting to deliver clothes to the protesters, but the police immediately released them when they determined they were the sons of Milinkevich. (Note: The brief March 20 and 21 arrests of prominent opposition figures such as Anatoly Lebedko, Lebedko's deputy Aleksandr Dobrovolsky, Belarusian Popular Front deputy Aleksey Janukevich, and reportedly a 100 others will be reported septel.)

Comment

17. (SBU): The March 20 rally was decidedly smaller than the previous evening's crowd. Opposition leaders had hoped March 20 would attract more people than on March 19 to give momentum to this cause. It seems their effort is not succeeding, reflecting the continued problems the opposition has in connecting to and

organizing the population.

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